

The God I Don't Believe In: The Uncaring God.

Amanda Tuohy, Kew Baptist Church, May 2016.

I remember where I was that day... I had just sat down in the early evening to watch the news on the TV, and the image I saw left me speechless and almost unable to breathe.

A little boy's body had been washed ashore on a beach in Turkey. There he was, facedown... those tiny hands and little legs... I will never forget that image. His name was Aylan; he was three years old and was from Syria. He and his family had made a treacherous journey across Turkey to Europe, but their dinghy sank off the coast of Turkey. Aylan's story gave us a face to the refugee crisis:

And our hearts broke.

In 1986, a crime was committed which has haunted me to this day. A beautiful young woman named Anita Cobby was walking to the train station after work and was grabbed by five men who, over many hours, raped, tortured then murdered her. I listened to the details of the crime, and I wept and wept. I felt sick to the stomach.

In my twenties at the time and living in my church bubble where we praised the Lord and all was sweet, I was mortified. Wait a minute God... You saw this and you stood back? You let them do such horrid things to your precious daughter... your child?

An American philosopher named Robert M. Price says this: "Who needs Satan when you have a god like this?"

Atheist Deacon Verter says, "Theists claim to base their morality on God's will. This is just admitting that they are willing, if commanded by their god, to kill babies, kittens and puppies. And before you say, 'God wouldn't do that,' please read your 'holy' book again."

A man named Hubert Nasl, originally from Germany, owned a Guest House in Marysville Victoria. Our family would stay there every year in January for our holidays. Sometimes a coldness, a hardness would come over him. He knew I was a Christian, and one day he stopped me and said, "You weren't there during the war, during the Nazi regime... If you saw what I saw...the streets filled with horror and sadness. You say you believe in a caring God of love who saw all of that and did nothing?"

In December 2004, a Tsunami killed more than 250,000 people around the rim of the Indian Ocean. Newspapers and magazines were full of letters and articles asking, "Where was God?"

There seems to be a litany of woe throughout history-the Holocaust, natural disasters, wars where millions of young men were killed, genocide, injustice...

My favourite musical is Les Miserables. I defy anyone who is unmoved by the song sung by Fantine called, 'I Dreamed a Dream':

"I dreamed a dream in time gone by when hope was high and life worth living; I dreamed that love would never die, I dreamed that God would be forgiving..."

Later, "But there are dreams that cannot be and there are storms we cannot weather. I had a dream my life would be so different from this hell I'm living, so different now from what it seems... Now life has killed the dream I dream."

As you turn the pages in the Bible you will see similar sentiments:

In Psalm 88, we read a cry from the depths of one soul who lived about 3,000 years ago.

He says, "my soul is full of trouble...I am like a man without strength. I am set apart with the dead whom you remember know more, who are cut off from your care... I am confined and cannot escape, my eyes are dim with grief... I call to you, O Lord, everyday; I spread out my hands to you... Why, O Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me?... Your terrors have destroyed me... You have taken my companions and loved ones from me... The darkness is my closest friend."

There the Psalm finishes. That's it. No praise of God here. God seems snide and cruel. The words are ugly, but so can life be.

At this point in time when this man's heart was being wrung out like a sponge, an orderly list of 10 good biblical reasons as to why this is happening may not be a good response! I believe that when someone is grieving or going through difficult challenges in life, it may be best to simply listen and put a hand on their shoulder; words sometimes get in the way.

How do we respond to the deep questions of life? Do we sweep them under the carpet and hold our anger in? As Christians, we seem to think we have to control our feelings, and certainly, there is a dark side to anger where it can turn to bitterness and hatred, then rob us of hope.

A Norwegian artist, Edvard Munch painted a well-known painting called 'The Scream'. It is an horrific portrayal of despair; a painting of a gaunt figure, twisted and tormented with eyes wide and mouth open. The figure is wailing, and the horror is magnified by the fact that you can't hear its cry. It is a silent scream... An inner scream of despair.

Let us not be afraid to cry out or be angry like the man in Psalm 88, and to give our emotions a voice. God is big enough to take anger like this. Strong emotions open the door to hard questions like, is God uncaring? Does life make sense? Why God?

The 'why' goes back thousands of years and is asked by many, including a man named Job. The Book of Job was written between 1,000 and 2,000 BC. Job had it all-money, land, status, family. He also had a pious reputation. Satan went to God and said, "Stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face."

God says, "He's yours, only don't lay a finger on him." Off with glee Satan went.

Job's donkeys and oxen were plundered, his servants massacred, lightning kills his sheep and shepherds, camels are stolen. Then, as if that wasn't enough, a "mighty wind swept in from the desert" and struck the house where Job's ten children were having dinner. The house collapsed on them and they all died.

Who or what caused Job's trials? The decree of God did. Satan asked permission (note that Satan had to ask permission- he is not given total free reign) to stir things up, but God signed the authorization papers. Job recognises this when he says, "The Lord has taken away... Shall we accept good from God and not trouble?"

The New Testament strikingly puts the murder of Jesus and the decree of God on the same page. The Apostle Peter preaching to a crowd in Jerusalem says, "Jesus of Nazareth...was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge, and you, with the help of wicked men, put Him to death by nailing Him to a cross." (Acts 2: 22-23).

God saw the crucifixion coming because He decreed it. The phrase means "by God's-having-been-decided-counsel." God ordained history's most well-known and horrific murder. Most of us have

little trouble crediting God with our happy days when we feel 'blessed', but what about a God who decrees murder?

But then, we read in John 3:16 that "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him would not perish but have eternal life." There is obviously something more going on here.

Now, continuing with Job: We can't contain God. After many chapters of Job and his friends defining and questioning Job's predicament, God finally speaks: (Job 38)

"Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?

Were you there when I laid the earth's foundations?... Who laid its cornerstone while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?... Who fathers the drops of dew?... Who endowed the heart with wisdom?"

I love this: "Do you know when the mountain goat gives birth? Do you watch when the doe bears her fawn?" And so God goes on and Job is stunned; he is flawed.

God never gives Job a reason for his suffering, but He gives Himself. Job says, "I am unworthy-how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth... My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you, and I repent in dust and ashes."

Job's questions faded away because God took his breath away.

In C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, there is a lovely scene where Mr and Mrs Beaver describe Aslan to Lucy and Susan:

"Is...is he a man? asked Lucy." "Aslan a man!" said Mr Beaver sternly. "Certainly not! I tell you he's the king of the woods and the son of the Great Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea. Don't you know he is the king of the beasts? Aslan is a lion...the Lion, the great Lion.

"Ooh" said Susan, I thought he was a man. Is he...quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will dearie, and make no mistake," said Mrs Beaver "if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else silly.

"Then, he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr Beaver. "Don't you hear what Mrs Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the king, I tell you."

The Apostle John in the Book of Revelation, speaks of God's voice as 'having the sound of rushing waters'. He said 'His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance'.

I think that we in the West, surrounded by entertainment, technological gadgets, credit cards, busyness and noise... We have made God into our own image. We have this expectation to be happy and successful and if we are not, we crawl into a foetal position. We think God exists to make our lives trouble-free. But pain can wake us up. C.S Lewis wrote,

"God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our consciences, but shouts in our pains; it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

Where is the humility? It is interesting how in poorer countries, many people are joyful and content even though they suffer hardship. Sometimes, when you realise you are among the least, the littlest, the last, the lost, God becomes everything. Then, you find your heart drawn nearer to God by the smallest of enjoyments. You feel as though you possess everything, yet you have nothing.

The Apostle Paul saw himself as 'the chief of sinners' and 'the least of the Apostles'. He had a vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus. Jesus appears to another man in Damascus telling him to find and baptise Paul. Jesus says to him, "This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for name."

Uncaring God? Or did these followers of Jesus see that they were part of something bigger and more wonderful than they could ever imagine? The Apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:17: "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all." These words were spoken from a man who was in ship wrecks, was beaten to a pulp, was flogged until his back was shredded, and finally, was beheaded for his faith! Humbly Paul says in Philippians 4:12 that Christ was more than enough for him, whether he was well fed or hungry, or living in plenty or want.

What about Jesus? He experiences a 'cosmic abandonment' while on the cross-the loss of the infinite love He had with His Father for eternity. I know and believe that our anguish and our cries deeply move Him because in that stark moment when He cried out in a loud voice, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" he was crying out on behalf of all humanity. He came to know firsthand despair, rejection, loneliness, poverty, bereavement... so that He could tenderly say, "I will never leave you or forsake you." And there's the Beauty... Sometimes we don't need any more speculations or explanations... we need Him.

In Isaiah 54 He becomes husband to the grieving widow and comforter to the barren woman.

In Psalm 10:14 he is Father to the orphan.

In Isaiah 62:5 He is Bridegroom to the single person.

In Isaiah 9:6 He is Counsellor to the depressed and confused.

Are you broken? He was broken like bread.

Are you despised? He was rejected.

Do you cry that you can't take it anymore? He was a man of sorrows acquainted with grief.

Did someone betray you? He was sold out for thirty silver coins.

Does He descend into our hells? Yes, He does. Even in the depths of the Nazi camps, even in a home where a precious child is not being loved as it deserves, even in an empty room where someone sits numb, not wanting to face life anymore, even in my life when I feel so sad and disturbed at the immense tragedies in life, even in my darkest moments when there is no song in my heart... Even then. The one who in the Garden of Gethsemane was so filled with anguish that He sweated blood as He pleaded with God that this 'cup', this sacrifice could be averted. Yes, Jesus cares.

And He weeps.

He wasn't afraid to show emotion. He wept when His friend Lazarus had died and as He saw the pain of grief in the eyes of Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus. It actually says in Psalm 56:8 that God bottles our every tear. Isn't that precious?

We have this promise from a caring and loving God that one day (Revelation 21:4) there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. Revelation 7:17 says, "... And God will wipe away every tear from (our) eyes."

Do you know what? I think something we lack in our culture is awe. Awe helps us turn our eyes toward God, then to others. We come to understand both our insignificance within creation, and our significance to the Creator.

When I was a little girl, I felt so insignificant. I was bullied at school because of my shyness... I could barely speak to anyone. I felt afraid of life, afraid of people. One thing that brought me great joy was sitting in our back garden every afternoon after school. I would read stories to my pet rabbit, duck and guineapigs which sat around me. Little birds would fly in and land close by. I particularly remember sparrows. They were not flashy birds, but upon closer inspection, I was amazed at the detail on their feathers. I remember thinking that Someone with a beautiful heart and incredible creativity made that tiny bird.

Not long after, my parents bought me a Bible and I loved reading it, particularly the New Testament. I became captivated by Jesus... I loved His compassion, His integrity, His deep emotions in different situations, His anger at religion without love and mercy. I loved the way He looked at people who had been ostracised by others, giving them hope and a purpose. It was like every dark corner, every broken heart, every lost soul was touched by His light and could breathe again. I found my confidence in Him. He taught this little girl how to dream, and though I have been through many disappointments and have struggled with self-esteem, I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that He does care even though I have cried many tears.

I read a passage in Luke's Gospel many years ago (Luke 12:6,7) where Jesus says, "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs on your head have been numbered..." I was amazed at how the Son of God could speak about sparrows, when some of us don't even give them a thought. I felt very moved at that and knew that I believed in an amazing God. That is why to this day, I paint birds and have a small business selling my pictures of birds. I do this to remind myself of His incredible artistry and of His majesty, but also of His tenderness and compassion which makes my heart ache with Wonder.

Whether it's dew drops glistening on an autumn morning, or a Magpie singing at dawn, or the wonder of a pearl taking three years to form in the darkness of the ocean, or the miracle of a caterpillar emerging from a chrysalis as an enchanting creature called the butterfly... I stand constantly amazed with my head bowed, knowing that though I will never fully understand the tragedies of life, like a little child, I can say, "Father, I believe you are caring and loving and true."